
Editorial Introduction

Romanisation in Comparative Perspective

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Romanisation has not been studied from a comparative perspective so far, although there are a number of case studies that focus on particular speech communities.¹ In order to fill this gap in the literature, the articles in this special issue were first presented at a workshop, entitled “Romanisation in Comparative Perspective: Explaining Success and Failure”, held at Bilkent University, Ankara, 5–6 September 2007.² The workshop addressed this theme with the specific aim of explaining why romanisation has been implemented successfully in certain cases and why it has failed in others. Hailing from diverse disciplines, workshop participants brought together a variety of methodological approaches, which represented a challenge and an opportunity at the same time. Each participant reassessed the story of a success or failure within the socio-political and historical context of a particular country or region.

Sociolinguists coined the term ‘romanisation’ to describe a peculiar form of change in writing systems, the first examples of which were observed from the mid-nineteenth century onward. To be precise, romanisation is a reform process, initiated by the ruling authorities and supervised oft-times by language experts, whereby a Roman-based alphabet is prepared and then enforced to replace the former writing system of a speech community.³ That former writing system in question could be either a non-Roman alphabet or a non-alphabetic script, ie a variety of a logographic or a syllabic writing system.⁴ In other words,

¹Shlomit Shraybom-Shivtiel, ‘The Question of Romanisation of the Script and the Emergence of Nationalism in the Middle East’, *Mediterranean Language Review* 10 (1998), pp. 179–196; R. J. Fouser, ‘Nationalism and Globalism in Transliteration Systems: Romanization Debates in Korea’, *Language Research* 35 (1999), pp. 151–177; Birol Caymaz and Emmanuel Szurek, ‘La révolution au pied de la lettre: l’invention de l’alphabet turc’, *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (e-journal) No.6 (2007), URL: www.ejts.org/document1363.html; François Georgeon, ‘Des caractères arabes à l’alphabet latin: un pas vers l’occident?’, in *Des ottomans aux turcs: naissance d’une nation*, François Georgeon, ed. (Istanbul, 1995), pp. 199–221; Esther Raizen, ‘Romanization of the Hebrew Script: Ideology, Attempts, and Failure’, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1987; İlker Aytürk, ‘Attempts at Romanizing the Hebrew Script and their Failure: Nationalism, Religion and Alphabet Reform in the Yishuv’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (2007), pp. 625–645; Helma Pasch, ‘Competing Scripts: The Introduction of the Roman Alphabet in Africa’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, No. 191 (2008), pp. 65–109.

²I would like to thank the editors of JRAS for agreeing to publish the proceedings of the workshop and Charlotte de Blois for her cooperation throughout this project. My thanks also go to TÜBİTAK (The Turkish Science and Technology Research Foundation), Metin Heper, Dean of the Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences at Bilkent University, and Talat Halman, Dean of the Faculty of Letters at the same institution, for providing funding to cover the costs of this international workshop; Hürat Çankara helped me immensely by kindly bringing to my attention the curious *Ra’binsan kru’so* for which I am grateful.

³Florian Coulmas, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 443–444.

⁴For further information on different types of writing systems, see I.J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1963); Florian Coulmas, *Writing Systems: An Introduction to their Linguistic Analysis* (Cambridge, 2003), especially Chapters 2 to 5.

romanisation can take place only in societies which were already literate before the adoption of a Roman-based alphabet. It is important to distinguish, therefore, between romanisation and alphabet-making: the latter term refers to the historical attempt by colonial rulers and missionaries to provide Roman-based alphabets for aliterate speech communities.⁵

The Roman alphabet became the dominant script of administration in the Mediterranean basin from the first century BCE and continued to expand into Europe in the footsteps of the Roman legions, while Latin served as the *lingua franca* of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire. Whereas Latin atrophied and eventually ceased to be a spoken language, the Roman alphabet received a second lease of life as a result of its association with the Roman Catholic Church.⁶ The use of Latin in the Catholic liturgy introduced the Roman alphabet to formerly non-aliterate peoples in distant corners of Europe and helped to establish it as the uncontested writing system for language communities which spoke (and still speak) languages that belong to the Indo-European or Finno-Ugric families. In the early modern period, the Roman alphabet of the Catholic west was bounded by the Cyrillic and Greek alphabets of the Orthodox world in the east and the Arabic alphabet of the predominantly Muslim peoples in the south and the south-east.

The affinity between a civilisation, its religion and its alphabet in each one of those cases was a striking phenomenon. When employed by an assortment of peoples who nevertheless adhere to the same faith, scripts created closed systems of style, education, and a routine of allusions, which we today call a civilisation. Therefore David Damrosch has used the term “scriptworlds” in order to highlight the role of writing systems in shaping distinct sets of shared values and thought structures:

Scripts may illustrate the classic Sapir-Whorf hypothesis better than language does: writing systems profoundly shape the thought world of those who employ them, not for ontological reasons grounded in the sign system as such but because scripts are never learned in a vacuum. Instead, a writing system is often the centerpiece of a program of education and employment, and in learning a script one absorbs key elements of broad literary history: its terms of reference, habits of style, and poetics, often transcending those of any language or country.⁷

On the other hand, writing systems also benefited from their association with a religion or civilisation. The Armenian, Ge’ez, Coptic and Syriac alphabets could have well fallen into oblivion had it not been for the fact that the Armenian Apostolic, Ethiopian, Coptic and Assyrian churches embraced them with the aim of constructing visible barriers to separate their folk from others.⁸

It was particularly this affinity between scripts, religions and civilisations that made the expansion of the Roman alphabet in the sixteenth century out of its traditional base in

⁵Coulmas, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*, pp. 443–444; Coulmas, *Writing Systems*, pp. 234–236.

⁶Françoise Waquet, *Latin or the Empire of a Sign* (London, 2003); Nicholas Ostler, *Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin* (New York, 2007).

⁷David Damrosch, ‘Scriptworlds: Writing Systems and the Formation of World Literature’, *Modern Language Quarterly* 68 (2007), pp. 195–219.

⁸Nicholas Ostler describes this as “the shield of faith”; see his *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* (London and New York, 2006), pp. 86–93 and 256. Also see John F. A. Sawyer, *Sacred Languages and Sacred Texts* (London, 1999); and William Safran, ‘Language, Ethnicity and Religion: A Complex and Persistent Linkage’, *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (2008), pp. 171–190.

western Christendom a very disturbing encounter for those who were subject to it. Colonial rulers and clergymen introduced the Roman alphabet to the Americas, Africa, and pockets of European settlements in South Asia, China, Japan, Australia and the Pacific islands. Many of those cases, however, could be considered alphabet-making, from a sociolinguistic point of view: European conquerors rarely came across a writing system that could rival theirs in the Americas, Africa, Australia and the Pacific and, thus, simply imposed the Roman alphabet on the local peoples; however, in East Africa and Asia, where well-established rival scripts preceded the arrival of the Europeans, the colonisers and the colonised remained faithful to their respective writing systems down to the twentieth century.

Ironically, the first case of romanisation took place in Romania in the heart of Europe. The newly-independent Romanian government decided to shift from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Roman in 1860, a move that was meant to end Romania's status as a satellite of Russia in the Balkans and to complement its realignment within the orbit of western European powers, especially France.⁹ After a brief interval, romanisation was implemented successfully in Vietnam in a reform process which extended from 1910 to the 1950s and a Roman-based alphabet, called *Quoc-Ngu*, was finally adopted as the official writing system.¹⁰ Much more spectacular than these two, lesser-known cases was the momentum for romanisation in the Turkic-speaking world after the Baku Congress of Turcology in 1926.¹¹ The congress was the handiwork of political authorities and language engineers in Moscow, who aimed at bringing to an end the centuries-old dialogue between the Turkic Muslim peoples, who now lived in the USSR, and the rest of the Islamic world by identifying the commonly-used Arabic alphabet with obscurantism and backwardness. Furthermore, the introduction of the Roman alphabet, generously modified for each Turkic community to suit its particular dialect, would act as a factor that divided the Turkic Muslim peoples of the USSR unlike the Arabic alphabet which actually united them. In what Arnold Toynbee called an event of world-historical proportions,¹² these communities started to romanise their writing systems one after the other, with the Yakuts and the Azeris being the pioneers and the Uzbeks, the Crimean Tatars and others following suit shortly.¹³ The most stunning case of romanisation, however, took place in the Republic of Turkey in 1928, a decision

⁹Barbara Jelavich, *Russia and the Formation of the Romanian National State, 1821–1878* (Cambridge, 1984).

¹⁰Coulmas, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*, p. 543; and George Sheldon, 'Status of the Viet Nam', *Far Eastern Survey* 15 (1946), p. 377.

¹¹The congress resolution on the question of romanisation was favourable: 'Der Kongreß hält die Ausarbeitung der Frage über die Schaffung einer einheitlichen phonetischen, wissenschaftlichen Transkription auf der Grundlage des lateinischen Alphabets zur Wiedergabe der Laute aller turko-tatarischen Sprachen durch die entsprechenden wissenschaftlichen Institute für wünschenswert.' See, Theodor Menzel, 'Der 1. Turkologische Kongreß in Baku, 26.II. bis 6.III.1926', *Der Islam* 16 (1927), p. 74; Joseph Castagné, *La latinisation de l'alphabet turk dans les républiques turko-tatares de l'U.R.S.S.*, Extrait de la *Revue des études islamiques* (Paris, 1927); Kamil Nerimanoğlu and Mustafa Öner, trans. 1926 *Bakü Türkoloji Kurultayı (Tutanaklar)*: 26 Şubat-6 Mart 1926 (Ankara, 2008).

¹²Arnold J. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs: 1928* (London, 1929), pp. 215–234.

¹³Yuri Slezkine, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review* 53 (1994), pp. 414–452; S. Wurm, *Turkic Peoples of the USSR: Their Historical Background, Their Languages and the Development of Soviet Linguistic Policy* (London, 1954); Michael G. Smith, *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR, 1917–1953* (Berlin and New York, 1998); T. G. Winner, 'Problems of Alphabetic Reform among the Turkic Peoples of Soviet Central Asia, 1920–41', *Slavonic Review* 31 (1952–1953), pp. 133–147; Jacob M. Landau and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, *Politics of Language in the Ex-Soviet Muslim States* (London, 2001); Ingeborg Baldauf, *Schriftreform und Schriftwechsel bei den muslimischen Russland- und Sowjettürken (1850–1937): Ein Symptom ideengeschichtlicher und kulturpolitischer Entwicklungen* (Budapest, 1993).

made independently of developments in the USSR and as part of a super-westernisation campaign led by the Kemalist ruling elite.¹⁴ The successful adoption of a Roman-based alphabet in Turkey had global repercussions.¹⁵ The pro-romanisation groups around the world, such as those in Greece, Mandatory Palestine, China and Japan, took heart from the Turkish example and received support from the League of Nations in this endeavour during the interwar period. UNESCO's predecessor, *Institut International du Coopération Intellectuelle*, passed several resolutions recommending romanisation to nations which still employed non-Roman writing systems and published a compendium describing the progress made in each of those cases.¹⁶ By the end of the 1930s, the Roman alphabet had become a charismatic script thanks to its paradoxical association with two, seemingly conflicting, global forces: Christianity as a world religion (both the Catholic and the Protestant branches) and modernisation/westernisation as a secular trend. After the Second World War, it was going to benefit further from the rise of English as the global *lingua franca*.¹⁷

If the Roman alphabet acquired an invincible, all-conquering image in those years, the image of a predator so to speak, that was a wrong impression. The current of romanisation was dealt a severe blow as early as 1940 when party bosses in Moscow gave orders to local Soviets to shift from the Roman alphabet to the Cyrillic, an order that was carried out without a debate for fear of Stalin. China and Japan, on the other hand, which could have rivalled the publicity given to Turkey had they become successful examples, proved to be failed cases as well.¹⁸ About half of the world's population in the twenty-first century continue to employ writing systems other than the Roman alphabet: the *Devanagari* script in India, *han'gŭl* in Korea, *kanji* and *kana* in Japan, *hànzì* in China, the Arabic alphabet in most of the Muslim world, the Greek alphabet in Greece, Cyrillic in Russia, Ge'ez in Ethiopia, the square alphabet in Israel, and the Armenian and Georgian alphabets – to name but a few – are testimony to the power of centrifugal forces that underlie the resilience of non-Roman writing systems.

¹⁴Fevziye Abdullah Tansel, 'Arap Harflerinin İslahı ve Değiştirilmesi Hakkında İlk Teşebbüsler ve Neticeleri (1862–1884)', *Belleten* 17 (1953), pp. 223–249; Hüseyin Yorulmaz, ed. *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Alfabe Tartışmaları* (İstanbul, 1995); Nurettin Gülmez, *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Harfler Üzerine Tartışmalar* (İstanbul, 2006).

¹⁵Arnold J. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs: 1928*, pp. 215–234. For other contemporary accounts, see Ettore Rossi, 'La questione dell'alfabeto per le lingue turche', *Oriente Moderno* 7 (1927), pp. 295–310; *idem.*, 'Il nuovo alfabeto latino introdotto in Turchia', *Oriente Moderno* 9 (1929), pp. 32–48; Albert H. Lybyer, 'Turkey's Adoption of the Latin Alphabet', *Current History* 28 (1928), pp. 880–881; Willy Sperco, 'Turkish in Latin Characters', *Near East and India* 34 (30 August 1928), p. 241; J. H. Reynolds, 'The New Orthography in Turkey', *Geographical Journal* 74 (1929), pp. 72–74; Margaret M. Wood, 'Latinizing the Turkish Alphabet: A Study in the Introduction of a Cultural Change', *The American Journal of Sociology* 35 (1929), pp. 194–203; Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, 'L'ambassade de France en Turquie et l'adoption de nouvel alphabet en 1928', in *La Turquie et la France à l'époque d'Atatürk* (Paris, 1981); Gülnihal Bozkurt, 'Türk Harf Devrimi'nin Alman Arşiv Belgelerinde Değerlendirilmesi', in *XII. Türk Tarih Kongresi* (Ankara, 12–16 Eylül 1994): *Kongreye Sunulan Bildiriler*, Vol. 4, (Ankara, 1999), pp. 1353–1361.

¹⁶Société des Nations, Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, *L'adoption universelle des caractères latins* (Paris, 1934).

¹⁷The significance of writing systems in the global balance of power is described in Laurent Murawiec, 'Géopolitique de l'écrit', *Pour la Science*, Dossier No.20, 'Du signe à l'écriture' (October 2001), pp. 94–96.

¹⁸John de Francis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* (Princeton, 1950); Hilary Chappell, 'The Romanization Debate', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 4 (1980), pp. 105–118; Minglang Zhou, *Multilingualism in China: The Politics of Writing Reforms for Minority Languages, 1949–2002* (Berlin and New York, 2003); Minglang Zhou, ed. *Language Policy in the People's Republic of China: Theory and Practice since 1949* (Boston, 2004); Nanette Twine, 'Toward Simplicity: Script Reform Movements in the Meiji Period', *Monumenta Nipponica* 38 (1983), pp. 115–132; Nanette Gottlieb, 'Language and Politics: The Reversal of Postwar Script Reform Policy in Japan', *Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994), pp. 1175–1198.

Who is a 'Romaniser'?

Romanisers belong, almost without an exception, to the political or intellectual elite of a country where romanisation is being contemplated. With the exception of Japan in the late nineteenth century, when the Romaji Club had thousands of members, romanisers have for the most part been few in number and rarely commanded a grassroots movement. Depending on their role and status in society, they either advocate a romanisation project in the local press and other forums, or as politicians they might attempt to implement the project. Most of the time, they are amateurs who have only a cursory knowledge of the phonetic repertory of their languages and rarely do we encounter a romaniser who received a solid training in linguistics or philology. In the case of colonial rule, the romanising ruling elite need not even be a member of the local population.

Historically speaking, we observe three distinct groups of romanisers. First were the colonial rulers who wanted to bring order to local administration and believed that the Roman alphabet could serve that purpose best in being the writing system of the supposedly superior overlords. Thus, romanisation could also be justified on the grounds that the introduction of a better writing system was going to improve the condition of the native people as well. A typical example of this group of romanisers was Sir Charles Trevelyan. Trevelyan had already reached the conclusion that romanisation could be a great aid to Indians and the administrative staff in British India as early as the 1830s, during his first appointment there as assistant to the commissioner in Delhi.¹⁹ His second book on the topic appeared in 1858 – essentially a revised and enlarged version of his first in 1834 – just before he returned back to India as Governor of Madras (1859–1860).²⁰ Having the political clout to put his plans into action, Trevelyan experimented with romanisation on a limited basis but his early recall cut that initiative short:

One of the earliest objects to which I directed my attention, when Governor of Madras, was the establishment of the new police. This was composed of persons representing the four prevailing languages of the peninsula, Tamil, Telugu, Canarese, and Malayálim, besides the Muhammadans, who spoke Hindústání; and much inconvenience arose from the variety of characters in which the daily reports were sent to the different head-quarters. As the easiest and best solution it was arranged that, whatever might be the language of the reports, they should be written in the Roman character. Manuals were prepared, and there was every prospect that the system would come into general use throughout the department, when my recall took place, and the matter relapsed into its former routine.²¹

The French, who were about to establish a vast colonial empire of their own in North Africa and Indochina, also gave some thought to romanisation for the same reasons enumerated by Trevelyan. Constantin François de Chasseboeuf, Comte de Volney and a member of the

¹⁹ Charles E. Trevelyan, *The Application of the Roman Alphabet to All the Oriental Languages* (Serampore, 1834).

²⁰ Charles E. Trevelyan, *Papers Originally Published at Calcutta in 1834 and 1836: On the Application of the Roman Letters to the Languages of India; to Which is Added a Letter from the Rev. R.C. Mather to Sir C.E. Trevelyan, Showing the Progress Made up to the Commencement of the Great Mutiny* (London, 1858). For an extensive summary of discussions on romanisation in British India, see Monier Williams, *Original Papers Illustrating the History of the Application of the Roman Alphabet to the Languages of India* (London, 1859).

²¹ Quoted in Daniel Defoe, *Ra'binsan Kru'so*, translated from Urdu into Persian by Sher Āli of Ka'bul and edited in the Roman character by T. W. H. Tolbort (London, 1878), p. xxi.

Académie française, espoused similar views at the end of the eighteenth century and wrote two books to publicise his views as recommendations to the revolutionary French government on the eve of the Egyptian expedition.²²

A second group of romanisers were local advocates who regarded their native writing systems as problematic from a practical point of view only and aspired to join what they saw as a global trend of romanisation. In their eyes, adoption of the Roman alphabet was not a cultural but a technical issue; it did not in any way imply the inferiority of the adoptive culture. According to this line of argument, romanisation was presented as a necessity for two reasons. First, adoption of the Roman alphabet was expected to eliminate discord between phonemes and graphemes, thereby making it much easier to learn how to read and write. Increasing levels of literacy, on the other hand, was certainly going to contribute to democratisation, economic development, industrialisation and cultural progress. Second, romanisers contended that the new alphabet would help local cultures connect with international society, make their achievements known globally, and hence prevent isolation and marginalisation. Arthur Koestler, for example, one-time member of a radical branch of Zionism, bemoaned the difficulty of learning the Hebrew alphabet, although he devoted many years to the study of the language. He proposed romanisation as the ideal solution to this problem:

I have spent on and off altogether some four years in Palestine and speak Hebrew fairly fluently, but am still incapable of reading a newspaper, to say nothing of books. The majority of new immigrants are in the same position . . . The only way to avoid the dangers of cultural isolation and stagnation seems to be the latinization of the obsolete and cumbersome alphabet. If this revolutionary measure could be carried out in backward Turkey, one would have expected it to meet with little resistance in this predominantly European community.²³

What is striking in Koestler's plea is the fact that he saw the Jewish community of the Yishuv – the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 – as a “predominantly European community”, an observation which implies that romanisation of the Hebrew script had nothing to do with a perception of inferiority on his part. In the same vein, the foremost supporter of romanisation in the Yishuv, Itamar Ben-Avi, emphasised this point when he published a Hebrew journal in the Roman alphabet. He claimed that *Ha-shavu'a ha-palestini* was:

. . . the first Hebrew newspaper in the world in Latin letters, that is, in principle, intended for the Muslims and Christians who want to study our beautiful language. But also, those Jews, who do not know [how] to read Hebrew in square (Assyrian) letters – will indeed find in this newspaper a good opportunity to study the language of the Tanakh in less time. . . . We are certain that our male and female readers will appreciate this effort of ours to spread our language in the Jewish Diaspora and in the Christian and Muslim worlds.²⁴

²²C.F. Volney, *Simplification des langues orientales ou méthode nouvelle et facile d'apprendre les langues Arabe, Persane et Turque avec des caractères européens* (Paris, An III [1794–1795]); *idem.*, *L'alphabet européen appliqué aux langues asiatiques* (Paris, 1826).

²³Arthur Koestler, *Promise and Fulfillment: Palestine, 1917–1949* (London, 1949), pp. 314–315.

²⁴[Itamar Ben-Avi], 'L qor'einu wl qor'oteynu', *ha Şavu'a ha Palestini*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (8 Teveth 5689), p. 1. The transliteration of the titles of the article and the journal follows Ben-Avi's system. For more information on

A similar justification for alphabet reform in a totally different context can be found in a speech by Mirza Malkum Khan Akhundzadeh, an accomplished author and the Persian ambassador to St James's Court in the 1870s, at a meeting where romanisation was being debated:

Il n'y a pas, messieurs, une question plus importante pour l'avenir de l'Asie, que celle dont vous vous occupez en ce moment. Nous connaissons malheureusement trop bien cette prodigieuse différence que le progrès Européen a mis entre vous et les peuples de l'Orient. En recherchant les causes de cette différence, si accablante pour nous, je suis arrivé à cette conviction profonde que l'obstacle de notre progrès ne vient ni de nos principes religieux ni de l'infériorité de nos races; l'obstacle vient principalement – je pourrais dire uniquement – de notre système d'écriture. Ce monstrueux système, qui nous a été par des circonstances exceptionnelles, a acquis avec le temps le caractère immuable de nos institutions sacrées, et aujourd'hui ses innombrables difficultés enchaînent si complètement notre développement littéraire que la régénération de l'Orient me paraît tout à fait impossible avec un pareil système d'écriture.²⁵

The tendency to blame the writing system for all kinds of problems, including backwardness, and to absolve the national culture and religion at the same time from any responsibility in the vulnerabilities of the nation is discernible in Mirza Malkum Khan Akhundzadeh, as well, and seems to be a hallmark of all romanisers in this second group. As a point of departure, their arguments answered back to conservative factions in their societies, who accused romanisers of being traitors to their national and religious heritage.

The third and the final group of romanisers were again local actors from underdeveloped or developing countries as a rule, who adopted an extremely negative attitude toward their own culture, religion, or civilisation, to the point of blaming them for the backwardness of their societies. From the point of view of this last group, the only path to salvation was to be found in a radical programme of westernisation, entailing a root-and-branch transformation of the traditional society along the models provided by Europe especially. Romanisation became an essential component of the westernisation project of this school of thought, since its standard-bearers regarded the Roman alphabet as a reliable vehicle for importing science, technology, culture and philosophy from the more developed West. The amazingly condescending attitude that they displayed towards their own culture helped them, in a way, overcome the familiar trauma of all romanisers, ie how to provide access to the pre-romanisation literature for the new, post-romanisation generation. If texts in the former, rival script were perceived as worthless junk – as many in this third group thought them to be – then romanisers did not have to lose sleep over the fate of that pre-romanisation material. In response to this question in Turkey, here is what Celal Nuri [İleri], a radical westerniser and a romaniser, said:

In principle, no harm would come out of that, since those books do not exist . . . Our libraries are empty, they are obsolete . . . As a matter of fact, those antiquarian volumes had led us to this

Ben-Avi and his activities in the Yishuv, see Aytürk, 'Attempts at Romanizing the Hebrew Script and Their Failure', pp. 628–637.

²⁵Quoted in Defoe, *Ra'binsan Kru'zo*, pp. xxvii–xxviii. For more information on his activities and alphabet reform projects in Persia and the Ottoman Empire, see Hamid Algar, 'Malkum Khan, Akhundzadeh and the Proposed Reform of the Arabic Alphabet', *Middle Eastern Studies* 5 (1969), pp. 116–130.

dead-end... Had we possessed enormous treasures like the French [and] British libraries, this problem could have led us to think twice, and might have even bothered us. But, what is it that we have in our hands? Three thousand out of date, inaccurate, deceptive volumes of books or pamphlets at most. To destroy them is more beneficial than keeping them.²⁶

One could come across statements like Celal Nuri's particularly during romanisation attempts before the First World War or in its immediate aftermath, when the absolute superiority of western powers in international relations, science and technology, culture and literature was taken for granted by the ruling elites and intellectuals in the colonies or the few remaining independent but underdeveloped countries. The discourses of western supremacy and the inevitability of submission to it are seen less and less in the interwar period and mostly disappear after the Second World War. The horrors of the two world wars and the emergence of alternative – usually non-democratic and illiberal – paths to modernity shook the self-proclaimed intellectual and moral pre-eminence of the West to its foundations.²⁷ Few romanisers, if any, dared to criticise his/her culture and native writing system so disdainfully in the new atmosphere.

A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Romanisation

In what follows I would like to propose a framework for the comparative study of romanisation.²⁸ Unlike other models that aim to explain a wider range of cases of orthography selection,²⁹ I have tailored this framework in order to focus on romanisation, a particular form of reform which in addition involves the thorny question of westernisation. This framework emphasises a number of factors or, to use a political science term, 'independent variables', which exist independently of romanisation in our context, but nevertheless have a direct impact on the process. A particular combination of some of these factors is at play in every attempt at romanisation, and that context-specific overlap of factors either creates an environment conducive for the shift to the Roman alphabet, or makes its implementation impossible. These factors are:

A. Technical-Infrastructural Factors

1. *Economy of writing*: As a rule, success of romanisation is dependent on economy of writing, i.e. writing with fewer and simpler characters. If the new, Roman-based alphabet is more complicated and less convenient than its long-established rival, that is to say, if there is no harmony between the phonemic repertory of the language in question and the Roman alphabet, it is less likely to catch on.
2. *Level of literacy in the rival script*: Speech communities tend to be very conservative about their writing systems. The higher the percentage of people who are literate in

²⁶Celal Nuri [İleri], 'Latin Harfleri Meselesi', in *Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e Alfabe Tartışmaları*, pp. 298–299. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the main figure in the Turkish romanisation and the powerful president of the Republic of Turkey, belonged firmly to the second group.

²⁷Michael Adas, 'Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology', *Journal of World History* 15 (2004), pp. 31–64.

²⁸What follows is a synopsis of my more detailed discussion in 'Script Charisma in Hebrew and Turkish: A Comparative Framework for Explaining Success and Failure of Romanization', *Journal of World History*, forthcoming.

²⁹For example, Christina Eira, 'Authority and Discourse: Towards a Model for Orthography Selection', *Written Language and Literacy* 1 (1998), pp. 171–224.

the rival script and who will thus be adversely affected by romanisation, the lower is the likelihood of successful reform.

3. *Economic costs of script change*: Romanisation is an expensive reform. It requires investments for providing access to pre-reform corpus and data-storage systems as well as a complete overhaul of the education and telecommunication systems and printing of new books. The size of investment is also dependent on the literacy level.
4. *Past experience of script change*: If the speech community in question has an unbroken record of employing the same writing system for a long period of time, romanisers will have to swim against the tide. However, former experiments with script reform are likely to diminish the symbolic value of the rival writing system.

B. Political-Cultural Factors

1. *Regime type*: Authoritarian regimes can impose romanisation in a top-down manner and silence its opponents with no trouble. However, in democratic societies with a strong civil society and an independent media, there would always be adversaries of script reform, who could not be forced to concur.
2. *Stability versus revolution*: The desire for rapid recovery from a perilous situation in the international arena, often coupled with a revolutionary atmosphere, makes it easier for reformers to present romanisation as a necessary element of a broader set of radical measures. An environment of stability, however, where reverence for national or imperial past is ingrained in historical consciousness is not conducive for script change in whatever form.
3. *Attitudes toward the west*: Positive relations with western societies or at least a reluctant admission by the local intelligentsia of their supremacy might lead reformers to settle on the Roman alphabet, instead of adapting the rival script to modern needs for instance. If the reformers have an inimical relationship with the West or, else, if there is a firm belief in cultural parity with the western civilisation, romanisation would be stillborn.
4. *Availability of canonical texts*: Canonical texts in the rival script, such as holy books or texts that have a national significance, stand as major impediments on the way of romanisation, because the religious and national identity of the speech community is anchored in them.
5. *Foreign intervention or missionary activities*: Experience of colonial rule and conversion to Christianity as a result of missionary activities might pave the way for romanisation as part of the encounter with a *mission civilisatrice* or conversion to a new faith.
6. *Minority groups*: Existence of large minority groups who embrace the rival script for nationalistic or religious reasons hampers the success of romanisation.

All these factors are drawn from different cases of romanisation and not all apply to each and every case. Furthermore, it is difficult to establish an order of precedence among them with respect to their influence in the final, political, decision to adopt a Roman-based alphabet. While regime type is a decisive factor in all cases, other factors, too, might have an equal weight depending on the context.

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